The Florida Cracker Cattle Association

Preserving The Foundation of America's Cattle Industry

www.FloridaCrackerCattle.org
www.FloridaCrackerHorses.com

Florida is cattle country and has been for nearly 500 years. Although hardly noticed in the shadows of today's tourist attractions and rapidly growing communities, Florida's landscape was once a vast area of native grazing lands. The cattle industry continues to be a significant part of Florida's $120 Billion Agricultural economy. Florida Cracker Cattle are living descendants of the cattle of Spanish origin which were the foundation of Florida's and America's cattle industry.

The first cattle to set foot (or hoof) on what is now the continental United States arrived with Juan Ponce De Leon on his second voyage to the new world in the year 1521. Spanish expeditions continued to bring cattle, horses and swine on their voyages to the New World. The place where Ponce DeLeon landed became known as Florida and the cattle subsequently became known as Florida Cracker Cattle. Ranching was born when Jesuit and Franciscan Friars (missionaries) set up a system of missions across north and north-central Florida and taught the Native Americans to tend livestock and crops. These were the first ranches in North America!

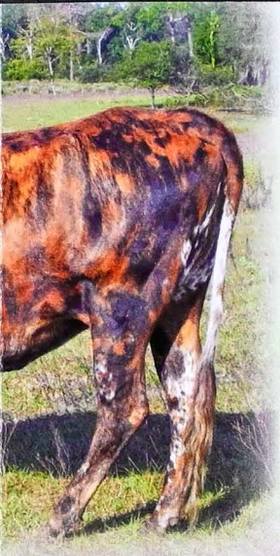
By 1618 Florida's Spanish Governors were actively expanding cattle production. The Spanish herds, as well as those kept by the Native Americans and many cattle running wild, flourished on the immense prairies and rangelands of Florida. Spanish cattlemen

in Florida began exporting cattle to the trading center of Cuba in the 1600s. This was the first industry to develop in the New World and trade with Cuba continued for the next three hundred years.

Spanish Vaqueros and Native Americans clashed during the Indian Revolt of 1647. These were probably the first fights between "cowboys and Indians" in North America. By 1700 there were over thirty privately owned ranchos in Florida with more than 20,000 cattle. Thousands more cattle were owned by missions, Native Americans and many ran unbranded.

By the early 1700's Britain, France and Spain were all vying for control of Florida as the cattle continued to flourish. Vast herds of these cattle spread across Florida's piney woods, palmetto prairies and open ranges.

During the War Between the States, Florida was the leading supplier of beef for troops on both sides. The Spanish (Florida Cracker) horses were highly prized for transportation. After the war, Florida was one of the first states to establish a viable economy. Florida cow men reopened cattle trade with Cuba and were paid in gold coin. During reconstruction, thousands of "Cracker" cattle were exported and millions of Spanish gold doubloons poured into Florida's post war economy as a result of this trade. Records show that in one ten year period (1868-1878) 1.6 million head of cattle were loaded on ships bound for Cuba. At this



time Florida was America's leading exporter. It would be impossible to overstate the importance of this financial boon to the state. This was the foundation of Florida's vast agricultural economy. Many of Florida's oldest and largest business began as cattle ranching and shipping operations.

Settlers moving into Florida in the 1800s likely brought some of their own northern European type cattle. These cattle of various spotting patterns, roans and line backs mingled with the light reds and blacks of Spanish stock to produce the unique color patterns of the Florida range or piney woods cattle which were later named Florida Cracker Cattle in honor of Florida's Cracker pioneers.

The importation of Brahman bulls in the 1930's and later significantly changed the genetic makeup of herds where they were introduced. Implementation of the Florida Fence Law brought changes to the open range and opportunity for improved animal husbandry practices. This made it possible for new breeds to survive in Florida's conditions. Crossing the hardy cattle of old Florida (Cracker cows) with other breeds, especially Brahman, became very popular. Pure Florida Cracker Cattle were quietly, almost without notice, being bred out of existence.

By the late 1960's there were only a handful of pure Cracker cattle left. These few cattle were scattered across the state on the ranches of families that had

been stubborn and smart enough to hang onto some of the old stock. Perhaps nostalgia but more likely, the practical utility of these cattle caused the ranchers to maintain these genetics in their commercial cattle herds. Doyle Conner who was Florida's Commissioner of Agriculture and a great historian urged the Florida cattle families to take action to preserve Cracker Cattle as a heritage breed. Ranching families who had preserved the old lines were encouraged to keep up the good work. In the 1970's and 1980's, nucleus herds of Florida Cracker Cattle and Florida Cracker Horses were established on state lands. These animals were donated from some of the purest known herds. Florida Cracker Horses were integral to the cattle industry and preservation efforts for Florida Cracker Horse paralleled the Cracker Cattle preservation efforts.

Under the direction of Commissioner of Agriculture Doyle Conner, the Florida Cracker Cattle Association and the Florida Cracker Horse Association were formed in 1988. The associations adopted breed standards and appointed evaluation committees to select the cattle and horses which were registered as foundation stock for the

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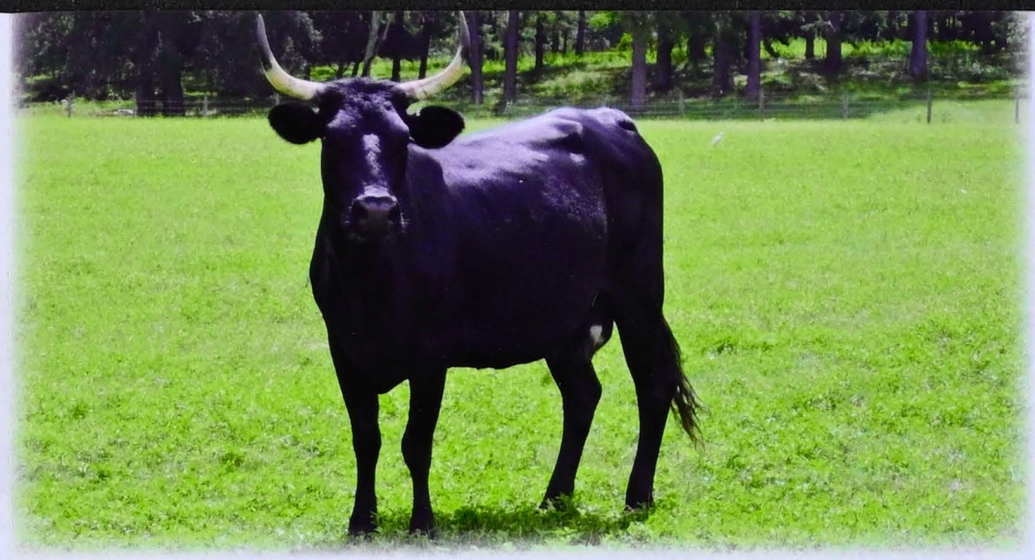

preservation of the breeds. In 1989 the historic first Florida Cracker Cattle Association Gatherin' was held at the Withlacoochee State Forest. The Florida Cracker Cattle Association Annual Gatherin' and Sale is held every fall. These Gatherin's are a great place to share the history of Florida's cattle industry. Since 1990 the annual Gatherin's have included a sale of registered Cracker Cattle and Cracker Horses. Cattle and horses from private and state herds are offered for sale to persons who want to own a "living link" to Florida's past.

Florida Cracker cattle are prized as living, tangible links to our history and are recognized as an important "heritage breed." With today's emphasis on naturally raised beef, the genetics of Florida Cracker Cattle offer important benefits. Centuries of natural selection made these cattle fertile, disease resistant and capable of producing a calf every year for many years. These cattle can not only survive but thrive in low input systems. Florida Cracker cows bred to English or continental breed bulls maintain the benefits of superior range cows while producing a calf for the commercial beef industry. Some producers are successfully using F1 (first cross Florida Cracker x other breed) cows as productive and efficient commercial range cows. The F1 cows are bred to beef type bulls to produce beef calves that fit today's commercial beef market.

To Learn More or Join the Association Contact:

The Florida Cracker Cattle Association
610 Hallelujah Lane
Monticello, Florida 32344
Telephone: (850)-410-0944
www.FloridaCrackerCattle.org
www.FloridaCrackerHorses.com

Cattle

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